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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 001009

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL
BANGKOK PLEASE PASS TO DRL/IRF WILL INBODEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: LEGAL PROTESTANTS HOLD UNAUTHORIZED MEETING: WANT
PROPERTIES BACK

REF: A) HCMC 0993 B) HCMC 1000

1. (SBU) In violation of their own GVN-approved charter, approximately 400 legal pastors and another 400 "lay volunteers" of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) met in Ho Chi Minh City September 10-11. While the 2001 charter allows for only one conference every four years, the leadership did not want to wait until 2005. Several members of the SECV Executive Board met recently with Pol JO to recount the proceedings of this first ever "General Congregational Meeting." They said the primary focus of the meeting was the training of church workers and future goals. Major outcomes included a plan to petition the GVN for the return of 214 confiscated church properties and to open a new training center in HCMC. The SECV is the only legal, GVN-recognized Protestant church for all of southern Vietnam.

2. (SBU) The SECV leaders told Pol JO they had submitted an official request to the GVN in August seeking the return of 214 pre-1975 church properties in HCMC and the 32 provinces from Quang Tri south to Ca Mau. Over the years, the GVN had destroyed some of the structures and converted others to "public" uses. Three HCMC properties of specific interest named were: 7 Tran Cao Van, the former "national" Protestant church and now a cultural center; 2bis Le Duan (across the street from the Consulate General), now a karaoke bar; and Dong Tam in Go Vap District, now closed. The SECV leaders said they hoped to restore 7 Tran Cao Van to its former status as their primary church. (The current "main" SECV church in HCMC is co-located with the offices of the SECV on Tran Hung Dao Street.)

3. (SBU) The SECV Board also mentioned plans to submit a formal request within the next month to break ground on a new bible college in HCMC's District 2 by January 2004. Current facilities, attached to their offices on Tran Hung Dao Street, were simply inadequate for their training needs. The Board asked the Consulate General to raise this issue with local authorities after the SECV had submitted its official proposal. Linked to this proposal were plans to request GVN permission for more pastors to travel overseas for study, especially those seeking advanced training and degrees. The SECV leaders told Pol JO they had already been in contact with several seminaries in the U.S. (Note: Post has already seen a dramatic increase in the number of both SECV and house church pastors traveling to the U.S. over the past year. End note.)

4. (SBU) One of the SECV leaders also asked the Consulate General to raise the issue of foreigner-only worship services with the GVN at an appropriate opportunity. According to this pastor, local authorities had broken up a prayer meeting at the Furama Resort Hotel near Danang about six months ago, telling the exclusively foreign congregation that such services were illegal. While the Danang SECV leadership had later submitted a request to establish a foreigner-only religious service at an area hotel, local authorities had yet to act on the request. (Note: Foreigner-only hotel services exist in both HCMC and Hanoi. End Note.)

5. (SBU) Comment: As has often been the case in the past, the SECV Board members were somewhat reluctant to address most issues in any detail -- especially those involving difficulties with the GVN. While the SECV leadership does not seem to have suffered any repercussions from this unauthorized meeting, at least as of four weeks after the fact, it will be interesting to see how the GVN reacts in light of the restrictions placed on leaders of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam after their own meeting (reftels). Perhaps the absence of any dire consequences indicates the value of legal recognition in the eyes of the GVN. Whatever the outcome, the SECV's plans continue to reflect their primary focus on building up their church step-by-step and a willingness to try to work through official channels, but also to step outside the bounds when they see it as necessary to achieving their goals. Protestant groups in Vietnam that have not joined the SECV often complain that its leadership is unwilling to take risks. The SECV decision to hold an "illegal" conference without first getting permission, as well as their highly publicized letter to the GVN last year protesting religious repression in the Central Highlands, suggests that is too simple.

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